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Tomorrow is the New Today

By Jim Carroll

Innovators Look Beyond the Horizon

With all the organizations I've studied, I've long realized that innovation comes naturally to those organizations that are focused on the opportunities of tomorrow rather than the challenges of today.

Jim Carroll

By building a culture that is relentlessly tuned to that reality, they easily succeed in doing things differently. And in doing so, they're the true innovators: they've been able to throw off the shackles of yesterday's problems in order to concentrate on what they could be doing to adjust to tomorrow.

Meanwhile, it is easy to see the organizations that just don't get it when it comes to innovation. My top 10 signs that you've got an innovation dysfunction:

1. People laugh at new ideas.
2. Someone who identifies a problem is shunned.
3. Innovation is the privileged practice of a special group
4. The phrase, "You can't do that because we've always done it this way" is used for every new idea.
5. No one can remember the last time anyone did anything really cool.
6. People think innovation is about R&D.
7. People have convinced themselves that competing on price is normal.
8. The organization is focused more on process than success.
9. There are lots of baby boomers about, and few people younger than 25.
10. After any type of surprise - product, market, industry or organizational change - everyone sits back and asks, "Wow, where did that come from?"

The Innovators

The fact is every organization should be

Photo: Fares Jammal

able to develop innovation as a core virtue. If they aren't, they certainly won't survive the rapid rate of change that envelops us today. There are several key elements to this successful innovation culture:

• A growth orientation: They've managed to instill a culture that has everyone thinking about what can be done, rather than what needs to be fixed. It's a culture in which people are thinking less about the problems that have occurred, and more about the cool strategies that could be pursued. They don't run "change-management workshops;" they have strategic sessions on "growing the business." It's not an easy task, but innovative organizations have managed to get their people away from "right now" to "our next step."

• The ability to cost-manage and grow at the same time: Give me a company that is focused strictly on cost management, and I'll give you an innovation laggard. Innovative organizations know that cutting cost and operational excellence is but one part of the equation. They also ensure that at the same time they hack away at cost, they are actively working on growing their market, learning how to do things differently, discovering new ideas and seeking opportunity.

• A translatable vision: Every single innovative organization has, at its root, at least one simple, concrete idea that defines its innovation scope. One industrial company I worked with defined it this way: "At this point, we know we don't have the depth to generate innovation ideas entirely internally, so we will see innovation partners to help us drive growth in our sector." Once that was defined, the rest followed, because it became acceptable to admit that innovation could come from somewhere other than internally.

• Time to market is critical: The organization relentlessly lives and breathes the mantra, "It's all about our ability to get the product/service to market on time." With that key goal, they manage to harness their energy towards a growth and ideas agenda.

Creative organizations fuel a culture of curiosity, and encourage their people to look for trends, signs of change and opportunities everywhere.

• Internal collaboration: The organization has gone beyond seminars about teamwork to a culture in which ideas are instantly shared, debated, transferred, analyzed and recomposed. There is no more debate about the need to break down silos; they are gone. What remains is a desire to learn from each other and build on common insight.

• A transition at the top, of managers to

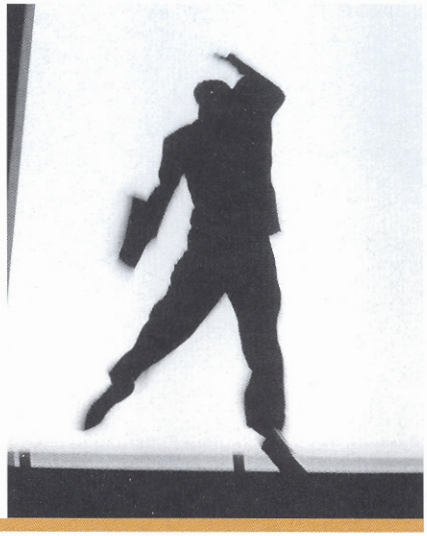
leaders: Innovative organizations have transitioned the roles of management. They've moved away from such mind-numbing activities as day-to-day oversight, implementing procedures, generating reports and all the other routine. Instead, they're redefining the organization by pushing decision-making to the lowest capable level, defining goals and outcomes that staff can pursue and putting into place collaborative and market-oriented feedback loops. In other words, they're thinking about all the things the organization should be doing to survive and thrive in a fast-paced market.

• At every level, a tactical-to-strategic transition: At the same time that the role of management has evolved, so too has the role of staff. As part of the shift to innovation, the organization has transitioned the roles of many staff so that they provide a more strategic role ("What do we need to do to meet this new challenge?") rather than routine tactical activities ("I need to get this reconciliation signed off!") They've done this by automating a lot of the routine, day-to-day processes that can choke off innovation. They're freeing staff up from the performance of the mundane to the enhancement of opportunity.

• A partnership orientation: Innovative organizations recognize that they can't do it all. They look to actively work with their complexity partners in order to be able to do innovative things at the pace that the speed of change demands of them. Partnership is a key word: "We might not be able to generate all the ideas, but we sure as heck are going to know how to find them and capitalize upon them."

• Global skills access is a key success factor: Big or small, you can only drive innovation if you can access the complex talent needed to take you forward. Innovative companies have mastered just-in-time skills access; they can access and focus a unique set of skills for a unique purpose at a moment's notice.

Instill a culture that has everyone thinking about what can be done, rather than what needs to be fixed.



The Six "C"s of Innovation

Over the years, I've come to realize that part of the fuel that fires my passion for my work is my intense curiosity. I've also come to realize that thinking differently has become critical to my success.

So it is with you; in a time when business models, markets, customers, industries and clients are changing at an ever more furious pace, thinking differently about the world around you is a powerful and important personal trait to possess. You also need to ensure that you provide for a culture of creativity within your organization so that it can evolve at a pace that the future demands of it.

That's why I'd suggest that you think about instilling a culture of personal and corporate innovation by instilling my "Six-'C's of Innovation" in yourself and your team:

- Curiosity
- Creativity and rebellion
- Collaboration
- Change
- Courage
- Creating excitement every day!

Creative organizations fuel a culture of curiosity, and encourage their people to look for trends, signs of change and opportunities everywhere. They know that innovation can come from tension, and that tension can come from people who don't fit the traditional corporate mold. They establish a collaborative culture in which information sharing is expressly encouraged. They also know that success comes from embracing change, not shying away from it. Not only that, but they know that true, real, sustainable success can only come from doing things differently, and that this in and of itself requires courage, because change involves risk.

Excitement Every Day

I don't know how many surveys I have read that indicate that employees within many an organization are bored by their work. That's not the way to provide for creativity; it is by doing things differently that you can instill a sense of passion and purpose in even the most routine jobs.

Jack Welch might have come up with Six Sigma - but I think that in a world of rapid change, my Six "C"s provide a better framework for going forward! ■

Jim Carroll, FCA, is a leading international futurist, trends and innovation expert, with clients such as the BBC, Motorola, Verizon and DaimlerChrysler. He provides keynotes that spur creative and original thinking, as well as executive programs that can instill a culture of innovation and forward-oriented leadership within an organization. He is the author of What I Learned From Frogs in Texas: Saving Your Skin With Forward Thinking Innovation. More information about Jim can be found at www.jimcarroll.com and he welcomes your comments at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com